

Losing Face

November 2002



Above: Mariko Edmondson, *Supposedly Tenable*, 2002, oil on canvas, 183 x 183cm

Although it was the eyes, rather than the face, that Immanuel Kant described as "the windows on the soul", this hasn't deterred critic and curator Roy Exley from borrowing the metaphor for the title of a new group show of and about portraiture. But "Soul Windows" resists the interpretation that an image of the face has the clarity of a window pane; that it presents the viewer with the truth about a person's inner nature. Instead, the exhibition insists on the possibility of this image being warped or manipulated – just as imperfections in glass can distort what it purports to show clearly. Kant's words are suddenly ironic.

If you're expecting documentary portraits, then, you'll be disappointed. Exley has garnered an impressive selection of painting, photographic and video work from 14 artists who explore the evasions, obfuscations and distortions that complicate our observation of faces. Michael Schwab's portraits of porn stars culled from websites and movies mist up the glass completely; the warm fuzz of shape and colour distance us from women already hovering in a social and cultural limbo. Similarly, Harald Durstmüller photographs his subjects behind scalloped glass, so that faces are fragmented into disconcertingly abstract forms. By contrast, Mariko Edmondson's sitters are painted with minute attention to detail, yet they still elude the viewer by refusing to meet their gaze. In Russell Wickwar's painting *Dad 5*, a portrait dissolves into the grid that made it, like a half-finished Chuck Close. A single unpixelated eye fixes you with a cold stare; if this is a window on the soul, the blinds have definitely been pulled down. **CE**

"Soul Windows", curated by Roy Exley, 22 Nov-21 Dec, domoBaal contemporary art, London WC1 (020 7242 9604)